

OBITUARY

FRANCES MARY MURPHY 1926–1995

Frances was born on 29 April 1926. Her parents were both interested in birds and, so Frances recalled, probably also in flowers and gardens, and she soon developed a keen interest in natural history. Following the death of her mother when she was seven, Frances and her younger brother Edward continued to live with their father in the Yorkshire countryside. When she returned from boarding school during the school holidays she spent much of her time wandering in the surrounding fields. Later she recalled that even at this early age she seemed to have long known all the common flowers and birds of the area.

Frances was taken to the Natural History Museum whenever she visited her London relatives and was fascinated by the giant skeletons of the giant prehistoric saurians. Having read the second chapter of Wells's *History of the world*, which concerned dinosaurs, she then read the first chapter which gave an outline of astronomy. This led to a fascination with the stars which endured throughout her life. She once commented that in the early 1940s cosmologists believed the universe to be 10 million years old, while geologists put the Earth at about 100 million years old. The teenage Frances had considered this "an unsatisfactory arrangement".

In 1943 Frances went to Bedford College, London University, to read mathematics. It was an old-fashioned course, but she enjoyed the freedom of life for a year in Cambridge and then in London. In 1945 she became ill with very high blood pressure through kidney disease. Frances thought she "had had it", but luckily the trouble only affected the left kidney and after it was removed she recovered. Because of her illness, Frances lost a year's education and finally took her degree in 1948. She later considered it "not a very good degree", but it had taken her some time to get over the operation. With hindsight she thought that she should perhaps have taken a year off, but in typical positive fashion she wanted to get on with things.

After graduating Frances went to work at Fairey Aviation in the guided missile section, where her mathematical training was put to use calculating stability and flight paths. She found the work interesting and progressed well, ultimately having a small section to assist her. It was at Fairey's that she met John Murphy, and they were married in December 1949. The accompanying portrait of Frances at 40 was painted by Ted Watson, another colleague at the company.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Frances suffered from a sort of general blood poisoning which left her very tired. It was at this time that Fairey's was taken over by Vickers another aviation company which Frances dryly described as "the merchants of death". She did not get on with the new company and stayed only a year.

It was at this time that her interest in spiders developed. She joined the forerunner of the British Arachnological Society and went on a Field Studies course on spiders at Flatford Mill. One of the inspirations for her interest was W. S. Bristowe's *The world of spiders*. At first she wanted to photograph them because she could not draw "for toffee", and in order to do this she kept many in captivity, rearing them to maturity. In this she became quite expert and wrote several small books based on her experience.

Frances was quickly drawn in to the study of spiders and was a member of many arachnological groups. She was a founder member of both the British and American Arachnological Societies and also belonged to the British Tarantula Society, the Spider Club of Southern Africa, the Australasian Arachnological Society, the Centre International de Documentation Arachnologique and the Société Européen d'Arachnologie. Her wide interest in general natural history enabled her to



Frances at 40, painted by Ted Watson, a colleague at Fairey Aviation.

contribute to the London Wildlife Trust, the Wildlife Society and the London Natural History Society. Her childhood fascination with dinosaur bones was repaid when she became a founder and committee member of the Friends of the Natural History Museum.

In 1962 Frances joined the BENHS, which was then the "South London", and during her membership she contributed greatly to the Society. During the 1980s Frances was Secretary of the Society and in 1989 became President—the first and (so far) only woman to be appointed to the position. Later she was one of the BENHS representatives on the Joint Committee for the Conservation of British Insects (later Invertebrates). It was during her presidency that the Society received news that it would have to quit its long-held rooms at the Alpine Club in Mayfair's South Audley Street, and Frances spent much time and effort finding new premises for the Society.



Frances at the 1989 AES exhibition.

With a resurgence of her previous kidney problems a few years ago, Frances prepared a résumé of her life and sent it to Canon David Agassiz with the request that, whenever it might come, he should officiate at her funeral. I have drawn heavily on that résumé (and David's funeral oration) in preparing this notice, and reading through it I can still hear Frances' voice speaking to me. Frances died on 20 July 1995 and her funeral on the 28th of July was so well attended by family, friends and colleagues from the many societies to which she belonged, that there was standing room only for many of us.

Frances will be sadly missed by us all, but in particular by her husband John to whom our deepest sympathy is offered.

A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

Anyone who met Frances was immediately struck by the strength of her character. Some, who knew her less, mistook her outspokenness and hearing her acerbic wit failed to appreciate her dry sense of humour—their loss.

In 1980 when I first attended BENHS indoor meetings in the crusty rooms of the Alpine Club, I was immediately aware that the Society still had something of an archaic (but charming) atmosphere; at the time I likened it to a Victorian gentlemen's club. And yet here in the middle of the enthusiastic bustling males was a woman, and not a woman entomologist but an arachnologist to boot. Despite these ironies, Frances was not out of place; she cut a swathe through the Society, held her own on all occasions and commanded the respect of others on equal terms.

Even in the pub after evening meetings, Frances would join us other reprobates for a beer before home. When her renal problems reappeared, she was obliged to give up her usual half of Guinness, so took to ordering a small brandy instead.

One of the first things which struck me about Frances was that she and John were always zooming off on exotic holidays to strange parts of the globe. On several occasions she gave lectures to the Society detailing her adventures and showing spectacular slides. These were not at all wholly of spiders and you could always be certain that whenever she spoke, Frances would colour her narratives with bizarre anecdotes and amusing asides.

Frances once gave an account of her travels in New Zealand and I tempted my partner, Catrina, along to hear it since this was the land of her father. My glowing accounts of Frances' skills as a speaker were rewarded when Catrina later compared the measured but enthusiastic delivery to that of Joyce Grenfell. As ever, it was a delightful evening.

It was through her world travel that Frances was an inspiration to me. A few years ago Catrina and I had, as usual, left our holiday planning until the very last minute and were at a loss wondering where to go. The destinations we selected were impossible to reach, for this was the time of failing travel companies and consolidation of many flights meant that package deals and cheap flights were full or cancelled. Costa Rica in Central America came into our minds and I remembered that Frances had been there a few years before. I telephoned her to ask what she thought of the place and her immediate response was to invite us over to her house for a private slide show.

Here we were entertained with as professional a travelogue as we could wish to hear anywhere. And afterwards Frances showed us some of her pets, including one she just happened to have from Costa Rica—a large amblypygid tailless whip-scorpion sitting almost motionless in its case. It was now that Frances admitted she had a cunning trick to get through US customs quickly and easily whenever she travelled that way. She would inform officials that she was transporting live spiders in her baggage. This was not against regulations, but it meant she was ushered through a different customs route, one which was inevitably less congested.

Our holiday in Costa Rica was a spectacular success and one of the most exciting moments was peeling back a bit of bark to reveal an amblypygid—just like the one Frances had. On BENHS field meetings Frances was sometimes ribbed by the discovery that an interesting web was made, not by a moth caterpillar, but by a spider—a “Murphy”—and now I cannot see a spider without thinking fondly of her.

RICHARD A. JONES

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